FrameWorks Research Methods

FrameWorks Institute conducts multi-method, multi-disciplinary investigations to establish how people reason about issues and how we can improve communications strategies to invigorate a more complete understanding of social problems, as well as the need for collective solutions.

Across our methods, we focus on empirically testing both the dominant frames in American society (our descriptive work) and the re-frames that our research team hypothesizes will be most likely to move the public conversation in a more productive direction (our prescriptive work). Frequently, even our own hypotheses, which have been shaped in consultation with scientists and other experts in a given issue area, get thrown out in testing. We often refer to these failed ideas as our “Graveyard of Framing Hypotheses.”

A successful reframe is one that, through rigorous testing, has demonstrated the ability to move public attitudes and public policies in meaningful and statistically significant ways.

The Methods We Employ

Descriptive Research

Cognitive/Cultural Models Analysis

As a first step towards identifying the relevant cognitive and cultural patterns that shape Americans’ thinking about an issue, we typically undertake an analysis of the patterns of thinking that characterize people’s understandings of that issue. This “mapping exercise” is based on principles and data-gathering methods adapted over the last 10 years from the fields of cognitive anthropology and cognitive linguistics. We explore individual reasoning through close analysis of transcripts from in-depth, one-on-one interviews with a diverse group of Americans.

A base of at least 20 interviews is necessary to capture the cultural models in play for any discreet population. If regional variation or subgroup analysis is required, additional interviews are necessary. The resulting report offers a preliminary “map” of the most relevant cognitive/cultural models that guide Americans’ thinking on a given issue, and serves as a foundation for the subsequent reframing efforts.

Content Analysis

Content analysis of the major media narratives is usually important to our efforts. We typically recommend an extensive descriptive content analysis of news on the topic being studied. We normally conduct a national media analysis, capturing a six-week schedule of national print and TV news. This study draws from FrameWorks’ multi-year
experience in coding and interpreting content analyses from the perspective of Strategic Frame Analysis™.

Qualitative Research

FrameWorks employs an array of qualitative methods to explore and test potential “reframes” – those frames with the potential power to help people see an issue in a new way – in a group setting. This, in turn, allows us to anticipate the way that public discourse will interact with the messages we propose to introduce and reinforce. Using focus groups, public dialogues and media effects tests, as suited to the particular social issue, allows FrameWorks to anticipate any problems in creating a robust public conversation among diverse groups in the society.

We budget for anywhere from 6 to 12 focus groups with adults in several geographic areas. The groups consist of community influentials (people who are likely voters, volunteer in their community and/or attend a place of worship, are news attentive, and have spoken out to elected officials and/or written a letter to a news outlet or public official), but varied by gender, education, child status, or another demographic we determine to be of importance.

Focus groups are professionally moderated with informants recruited by a marketing research firm. The content of the groups is designed to both further our understanding of the frames identified in earlier research and to speculate about the viability of potential “reframes.” These qualitative methods also allow us to test various elements of the frame-messengers, visuals, values, and numbers/social math. At the end of these qualitative investigations, FrameWorks submits a written report based on an analysis of transcripts.

Prescriptive research

Simplifying Models Development

Most issues investigated by FrameWorks are abstract, policy-oriented problems which require Americans to understand causality, consequences, and conditions before they can meaningfully consider policies that can effectively address the problem. Connecting what is typically seen as a very individual concern to collective, public issues and systems often requires the development of a simplifying model to aid effective communications.

Simplifying models are a kind of metaphorical frame that both capture the essence of a scientific concept, and have a high capacity for spreading through a population. Numerous studies in the cognitive sciences have established that both the development and the learning of complex, abstract or technical concepts typically rely on analogies. An explanation that reduces a complex problem to a simple, concrete analogy or metaphor contributes to understanding by helping people organize information into a clear picture in their heads, including facts and ideas previously learned but not organized in a coherent way. Once this analogical picture has been formed, it becomes the basis for new reasoning about the topic.
To design and select an effective simplifying model, it is important to determine beforehand the current patterns of reasoning in the targeted group. The cognitive interviews in the first phase of our research will be designed, in part, to surface the hurdles (and assets) that bear on the public’s ability to learn about this topic. By identifying precisely what people already correctly understand, falsely believe, and/or do not yet understand, the elicitations allow us to target the simplifying model precisely and economically. And, by comparing this to expert understanding, we will be able to focus our attention on what core information needs to be conveyed in order to help people arrive at a proximate understanding that is consistent with that of experts.

Based on the earlier research, a broad list of dozens of candidate simplifying models will be generated, targeting the missing or erroneous conceptual steps in current thinking. The list will be arrived at partly via analysis of existing explanatory models in expert discourse, and partly through an iterative process of collaborative brainstorming, in which new candidate models are assessed. The long list of possible models will then be refined to a shorter list through a process of cognitive analysis designed to identify strengths and weaknesses of each model. We will then winnow the field, holding the candidate models to account in further qualitative and quantitative methods.

By measuring and comparing subjects’ acceptance of and facility with different messages — as they try to explain and reason about the target issue — we are able to judge how effectively particular messages will be absorbed and used, once they are introduced to the public. To date, FrameWorks has created and tested ten distinct models for issues as diverse as global warming and race. Survey research strongly suggests that, when combined with appropriate values cues, these mechanistic models further lift public comprehension and policy support of abstract concepts and policies.

**Experimental Surveys**

The primary purpose of framing experiments is to manipulate exposure to various frame elements in order to measure their effects on public opinion. The experimental design allows for the manipulation of frame elements – Values, Messengers, Models, etc. -- in a much more tightly controlled manner than the earlier qualitative methods allowed. Simply put, different samples of adults are exposed to different frames and types of information, to determine each element’s impact on public support for specific policies. Throughout this analysis, the experimental groups are compared to a control group that received no deliberate framing. The comparison provides insights into how a mix of communications elements will shift opinion.

To carry this out, we use an Internet-based venue and recruit from panels of informants. FrameWorks maintains relationships with Stanford University’s Political Communication Lab and PoliMetrix, with whom many of these studies are conducted.